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ABSTRACT

The ability to function independently as a reader and writer in the society is defined here as "functional literacy" and includes, for gay or lesbian students, access to their own cultural literature and the recognition of a multi-cultural literacy that includes gay and lesbian culture. Two central beliefs are at the heart of the discussion of literacy and the lesbian and gay student: (1) narrative writing--telling their own stories and telling the truth about their own experience--is essential to the attainment of literacy; and (2) for lesbians and gay men whose experience has been taboo, who have never had a consistent oral tradition on which to depend for information, literacy is fundamental to identity, culture, and survival. The need to tell "coming out stories" is a compelling drive for lesbian and gay writers. Writing teachers must face their responsibilities and rededicate themselves to seeing that all of their students have access to a fundamental literacy that is more than functional, that is truly multi-cultural and humane. (RS)

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LITERACY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDENTS

(A paper delivered at the Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English, in Seattle, Washington, March 1989)

In this paper I discuss literacy in relation to the specific needs of lesbian and gay learners. (It is to be noted that I will be speaking here of the ability to read and write in English; a discussion of bi- or multi-lingualism in this country in the context of gay and lesbian access to literacy, is beyond the scope of this paper - an area for future work.) I'm concerned here first with functional literacy, which I define as the ability to function independently in the society as a reader and writer, not only being able to read road signs and the ingredients on packages of food, to read bills and write checks, but to read letters, stories, and poems, to read newspapers, magazines, and some textbooks, and to write letters, journals, and stories about personal experience. Following a discussion of functional literacy, I'll talk about a multicultural literacy that includes lesbian and gay culture. At the heart of this paper are two central beliefs - one - that narrative writing, telling our own stories and telling the truth about our own experience, is essential to the attainment of literacy, and - two - that for lesbians and gay men whose experience has been taboo, who have never had a consistent oral tradition on which to depend for information, literacy is fundamental to identity, culture, and survival.

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In 1985 Jonathan Kozol's *Illiterate America* drew the attention of the American public to the fact that as many as 60 million Americans, one third of the entire adult population, are functionally illiterate. Kozol finds that the largest numbers of illiterate adults are white, native born Americans; in proportion to population, he finds that sixteen percent of white adults, 44 percent of blacks, and 56 percent of Hispanics are not functionally literate. (Kozol is speaking here of literacy in English.) Cutting across all ethnicities and language groups are lesbians and gay men, a group for whom statistics on literacy have never been gathered. "Volunteer against illiteracy. The only degree you need is a degree of caring," reads an ad on the last page of Kozol's book, sponsored by the Coalition for Literacy. Lesbians and gay men are a group of learners to whom this degree of caring has yet to be extended, a group for whom functional literacy has never been promoted. One out of ten Americans is lesbian or gay: what percentage have yet to attain functional literacy? I agree with Kozol when he describes "functional" as - quote - an "invidious modifier." He writes: "Machines function. People either perish or prevail," and he argues that what is due to all Americans is a "fundamental humane literacy." "Fundamental humane literacy," "empowering students," reaching an "invisible minority," "saving a nation at risk" - this is what literacy education is all about, to use the rhetoric of the movement. "We have hidden adult illiteracy," states Senator Paul Simon on the back cover of *Illiterate America*, "Jonathan Kozol's book arrives on the scene at precisely the right moment to help bring this problem out of the closet so we can meet it head on." Simon's metaphor of the closet is certainly ironic. What about the illiterate Americans who receive the message from every level of the educational system that the closet is where they belong?

In this paper when I talk about literacy projects I am referring to programs that are a part of an educational institution and not about

volunteer literacy programs, about which there would also be much to say. During six years of teaching and consulting for an adult literacy project at an urban community college, I found, with no surprise, that lesbian and gay students were extremely isolated and that their needs as learners were not being identified and met. The project I worked with had no faculty or administrators who were openly gay or lesbian (including myself) and did not specifically include any content material on the subject of homosexuality. Consequently there were no openly lesbian or gay students in the classroom. When I reflect on my own complicity with this silence I recognize an assumption I had that lesbian and gay students would somehow get by.

For instance, consider students who identify as multicultural, and therefore may be multiply marginalized, who enroll in a program that draws attention to marginalization and promotes a certain cultural identification. (By "multiple maginality" I mean the condition of being pushed into more than one margin at a time by a straight, white, middle and upper class, male-dominated culture that would appear to be at the center of this country.) Lesbian and gay students of color, for example, may be aided in their movement toward literacy by having the opportunity to see themselves represented as people of color even when they do not see themselves represented as lesbians and gay men. The program I worked with was in a city whose population is predominantly Black and our students reflected this; the writers and educators we invited to speak were usually Black, and much of the reading material we used and the social issues we addressed were issues of specific relevance to Black Americans. The program affirmed that Black students in the United States have systematically been excluded from educational curriculum, their experiences have been overlooked, they have been condescended to and

discriminated against. Our curriculum, taught by a staff of Black and white teachers together, was designed to encourage cultural identification, to validate students' feelings about their experiences of institutionalized racism and to acknowledge that oppression in the society creates negative learning environments where students are set up to fail and then blamed for that failure.

It is possible that some lesbian and gay students in the program, of any ethnicity, in their ability to identify with the oppression of Black Americans were able to extrapolate and come to the conclusion that discrimination against gay people is another way schools failed them. However, counting on this extrapolation is clearly an inadequate approach to literacy education for lesbians and gay men. What we need are programs that use lesbian and gay content material, that focus on issues of particular concern to lesbian and gay Americans, programs taught by openly lesbian and gay teachers along with knowledgeable straight teachers, programs designed to end the systematic exclusion of lesbian and gay students that continues to exist at every level of American education even as other ethnic and cultural groups are finally beginning to enter the curriculum.

In my classroom at the literacy project nobody was "out of the closet." Yet, besides knowing that 10% of my students could be gay, I was able to identify particular students as lesbian or gay because I ran into them in gay locales and at gay community events. Often this meeting occurred sometime after the student had left the program and before this contact could develop into trust and be used to encourage the student to write more openly about his or her life. In the one case where a student wrote about being lesbian we had met previously in a lesbian bar. This woman attended class erratically and only for a short time. She came into the program during a crisis period in her life and explained that she was disoriented

because of drugs she was using that had been prescribed for her depression. The one project that engaged her was what she called writing her life story, a narrative that was to focus on a series of events concerning coming out as a lesbian, including her story of breaking out of her isolation when she recognized her feelings for women by telephoning a local community college school board district and asking to speak to "that lesbian board member " she had just seen interviewed on television, the story of her appearance on the Phil Donahue show when she and her partner, an interracial couple, were among the first lesbians to become parents through donor insemination, and her story of being discharged from the military as a result of the publicity. Jackie had many stories to tell and I had become a trusted reader. Dazed and disheveled, appearing as if she might have been living on the street, she carried with her back and forth to the computer center the disk which contained a story whose telling for a short time kept her coming to school.

Jackie is an example of the pressing need lesbian and gay students have to tell their stories in writing and to experience the classroom as a safe environment. Her story is testimony to the fact that the writing component of a literacy curriculum must begin with a kind of narrative writing that serves a purpose similar to Jonathan Kozol's "literatures of oral history," taped stories from which, as in the literacy work of Paulo Freire, "generative" words are gathered. Students learning to write must be able to gather "generative" ideas for writing from their personal histories. In order not to censor themselves and stunt their own writing, in order to develop and sustain a voice, students must have access to their deepest material. To use Kozol's description, the oral histories must "draw upon the deepest roots of passionate conviction," and they can be elicited only after intimacy has been established between learner and literacy worker. Obviously the obstacles here for the lesbian/gay learner are enormous

unless this interaction between learner and literacy worker, between student writer and trusted reader occurs within an educational program that announces itself as open to the deepest roots of gay and lesbian experience. The danger is that students are forced to cut themselves off from these roots, at great cost to their writing and overall to their process of learning.

Narratives written by lesbians and gay men about discovering their sexuality and affectionality and about coming to terms with their identity are known as "coming out stories." The "coming out story" is a genre of our cultural literature; it is also one of the first steps a self-conscious lesbian or gay student takes in his or her entry into written discourse. My student Jackie wrote her coming out story and I believe that many other students would have done so had I helped open up to them that discursive space. In my course at the university, called "Writing in the Margins," when we arrive at the material on lesbian and gay culture, lesbian and gay students often write coming out stories. And this makes sense because in the development of a student writer, narrative precedes and is the basis for all other writing.

The need to tell coming out stories is a compelling drive for lesbian and gay writers. In the late 1970's, about ten years after the Stonewall riots, by which modern American gay and lesbian liberation is dated, a new gay and lesbian literature had begun to flourish, and published collections of lesbian coming out stories began to appear. Two volumes, *the coming out stories* (eds. Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope Stanley, Persephone Press, 1980; this text is currently being revised and will be published in a new edition) and *The Lesbian Path* (ed. Margaret Cruikshank, Angel Press, 1980; this book has been published in a new edition) together include more than 70 narratives. Many of these stories highlight the special role reading and writing have had in lesbian lives; they show the secrecy involved with this

reading and writing, and they reveal lesbians' unique dependency on the written word. Story after story describes the insatiable desire for reading, the difficult and dangerous search for books about lesbianism, trips to the library to riffle through the card catalogue looking for the word homosexuality, letters written to confused and often angry parents, journal entries furtively scrawled and long silences in journals during periods when a writer cannot even write to herself: as one woman put it: "When the gap between who I was supposed to be and who I really was got widest, I went silent." There are also descriptions of standing in bookstores nervously reading pornographic novels that would be far too risky to buy and take home. These accounts are similar to stories about heterosexual adolescents looking for books about sex. However, it is striking that the gay readers in the stories are not always adolescents, they are sometimes adults gradually and painfully coming to later life discoveries about a sexuality that may have been unrealized, hidden, or denied. What is unique to these lesbian and gay readers is that not only are they looking for information about sex, they are trying to find out about an emerging identity and they must do this secretly. There is no oral tradition to turn to for this kind of information, no safe and anonymous place outside of the library stacks. In the experience of any other cultural group there is no parallel to this ritual of self-discovery carried out in isolation through secret reading and writing .

Here I want to read briefly from one coming story that is both typical and highly unusual. This is from Barbara Grier's story, which she calls "The Garden Variety Lesbian." (This story appears in both *the coming out stories* and *The Lesbian Path*.)

I came out at age twelve, when I discovered reasonably, for myself, that I was a Lesbian. I did not know that word, of course; I didn't know the word

homosexual, either. But when I discovered behavior patterns in myself that I could tell were different from behavior patterns that my friends or other young women around me had, I investigated it in a quite sensible way for a fairly bright child; I went to the library and started looking.

I soon found the multi-syllabic word 'homosexual,' and while I didn't feel that I fit any of the descriptions given in the text book-type things that I was finding, I could tell that there was enough similarity so that there was no question in my mind, that it did describe me - except, of course, even instantly I had the conviction that the attitude on the part of the writers in the books was entirely wrong. I was a superior being, and I immediately felt that the lesbianism, or the discovery that I was homosexual, explained everything in my life. I believe that almost immediately on discovering that I was homosexual, I began to believe that this was the explanation for the superior functioning, for the superior intelligence I possessed. And I had something happen immediately to reinforce this.

I went home and told my mother and my mother treated it moderately lightly - that is, she said that since I was very young, that I was much too young for such an announcement, that I should probably wait a few months at least before deciding that this was an absolute fact. But if it turned out , indeed, that I was a Lesbian, then that was fine. The same things would be expected of me that I knew would always be expected of me; in other words I was to be an honorable person in every way all of my life, and if I were honorable all of my life nothing but good would come to me.

My mother supplied the name Lesbian to me in automatic, I think unthinking coversation. She simply started using the term lesbian and I automatically adopted it and have used it ever since.

What is typical in this story is the trip to the library for information, what is highly unusual is the mother's response. It is interesting to note that despite the closeness between the mother and daughter that might have given this precocious young lesbian an inclination of her mother's potential openness, she still goes to the library first. It is as if the desire to name , to find language to describe and identify ourselves, first to ourselves alone, is the primary instinct and the basis for all further self-revelation.

This process of self-discovery can have tremendous risks, as a story written by a gay man in a collection of gay male coming out stories called

Revelations (ed. Wayne Curtis, Alyson Publications, 1988)shows us, as a young boy living in a group home a counselor provides Steve with two books about being gay. He writes:

I began to read them immediately. I felt reassured after reading the stories and knowing that the people who wrote them went through the same problems I did, and they found ways to press on in life. I no longer felt lonely. And I began to gain more wisdom and courage.

My counselor gave me permission to use the order form in the back of *One Teenager in Ten* to order more books. I immediately ordered *Young, Gay and Proud!* and several others. I read them as soon as they arrived. I was pleased and amazed to find information like "Gays have been around since ancient Greece." The biggest message I got was GAY IS GOOD! I gained so much confidence and started liking myself. I wanted to write this new discovery on walls!

I also got two penpals through a correspondence center at the same time I placed the book order. These friends gave me more information, support, encouragement, and praise.

Not long after I got the books, I had to deal directly with anti-gay violence and name calling. The other kids had seen the title *Young, Gay and Proud!* on one of the books. The news went all over the home like wildfire. Before the week was out, I got teased, harassed, and got two black eyes.

This story of the reader punched in the eyes leads me to a piece of writing by a student in my "Writing in the Margins" class at the university. On the first day of class when I asked why students wanted to take this particular section, one student wrote that although he was taking the course because it fit into his schedule, one of the topics interested him. He wrote:

I am very homophobic, I can't stand gays, and am very prejudiced against them. I feel that my upbringing brought these negative feelings upon me. The community which I lived in was very conservative. Being a fag was considered the worst thing you could be. I am not prejudiced toward anything else, and I would like to learn more about this race of people. I don't feel that these feelings will ever leave me, but maybe my hate will

lessen.

Later in the course this student wrote:

The reader and the class discussions have been the first bit of information I have heard in support of homosexuals. I am still very ignorant, but this little knowledge I have gained through taking this class is already begining to influence my opinion. I was discussing this matter recently with a few of my housemates, and they expressed the same attitude I had before this class. When I asked them what they think of homosexuals they said first of all they try not to think of them. When I persisted, their feelings were to the effect that homosexuals didn't have any right to live. Even though I would have said the same thing two months ago, what they were saying sounded so stupid to me. It's not that they're stupid, it's that they know nothing about homosexuals. A little bit of real knowledge could change a lot of people's minds toward this subject.

The point I want to make by inserting this anecdote into a discussion of literacy is that it is not possible to talk about education for lesbian and gay students in this country at this time without recognizing the climate of violence in which we live. Schools and universities cannot continue to passively condone this violence by refusing to educate students about homosexuality and about lesbian and gay culture.

This brings me to my final point and to the topic of cultural literacy, a term in the limelight recently due to the debates over E.D. Hirsch's work on *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. In response to Hirsch and Bloom and their supporters, the Graywolf Press has dedicated its Fifth Annual to *Multi-Cultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*. This is the title of a collection of essays written by American writers over the last twenty-five years which express a variety of points of view and cultural perspectives.

However, none of the essays focuses on lesbian and gay culture. Lesbian and gay writers, if you recognize their names, are well represented in the anthology: out of the twelve writers four are key voices for American lesbians and gay men, but in the selection taken from Gloria Anzaldua there is no mention of lesbianism; Paula Gunn Allen mentions the oppression of lesbians and gay men once in a list of many groups who have long suffered from cultural domination. An essay by Michelle Cliff speaks of lesbianism and discrimination against gay men, but this is not the essay's focus. The fourth writer is James Baldwin in whose memory the collection is dedicated. Of Baldwin the editors write: "James Baldwin wrote powerfully of this country's identity and soul, and the love, fear, anger, dreams, and pain carried therein." In *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin wrote powerfully of "love, fear, anger, dreams, and pain" between two gay men, yet this subject of his is not often remembered in anthologies, - including the Greywolf Annual which makes a significant move toward promoting multi-cultural literacy, yet overlooks gay and lesbian culture.

All Americans need information about homosexuality, they need to know something about lesbian and gay lifestyles, families, spiritual practices, and communities, about gay and lesbian history, politics, art, film, music, and writing. They need to know more than simple definitions of the words lesbian and gay, more than that the phrase gay rights means the movement for civil rights for homosexuals, which is all the knowledge on this subject that Hirsch finds necessary for a monolithic American cultural literacy. And what is more, and beyond Hirsch and Bloom, is that all Americans need to know how to apply knowledge of lesbian and gay culture in ways that promote the acceptance of difference and create a national climate in which learning can take place for all people. As teachers of writing we must face our responsibilities and rededicate ourselves to seeing that all of our students have access to a fundamental literacy that is more than

functional, that is truly multi-cultural and humane.